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# THE ETHICS AND ESCHATOLOGY OF METHODIUS OF OLYMPUS

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AMONG the many problems which confront the historian of Christian thought and life in the early centuries one of the most complex and difficult is that of the relations, practical as well as theoretical, between Christianity and asceticism. Since the age of the Reformation there has been incessant controversy over the question whether the anthropological assumptions which underlie ascetic morals — the dualistic conception of the constitution of human nature and the conviction that there is an irreconcilable opposition between body and spirit — are really identical with the principles of Christian anthropology so that there can be no experience of the gospel message apart from a radically pessimistic estimate of the possibilities of good inherent in human nature, and without the acceptance of a scale of ethical values based upon the progressive stages of an ascetic discipline.

After centuries of acrimonious theological controversy fomented by prejudices on both sides, we are now perhaps for the first time in a position to consider objectively the historical relations between the development of ascetic ideas and the propagation of the Christian piety, and consequently to solve satisfactorily the problem of the interaction between asceticism and Christianity.

At the outset we may remark that all recent investigations, from the epoch-making work of Weingarten to the more recent studies of Strathmann, Bickel, and Reitzenstein,<sup>1</sup> have proved conclusively that, whether as an individual or an associated

<sup>1</sup> Weingarten, *Der Ursprung des Mönchtums*. Gotha, 1877. — Strathmann, *Geschichte der frühchristlichen Askese bis zur Entstehung des Mönchtums*. I. *Die Askese in der Umgebung des werdenden Christentums*. Leipzig, 1914. — Bickel, 'Das asketische Ideal bei Ambrosius, Hieronymus und Augustin,' *Neue Jahrbücher für das klassische Altertum*, 1916. — Reitzenstein, *Historia Monachorum und Historia Lausiaca*. Eine Studie zur Geschichte des Mönchtums und der frühchristlichen Begriffe Gnostiker und Pneumatiker. Göttingen, 1916.

enterprise, asceticism, aiming to nullify the impulses of sense in the endeavor to achieve the absolute and uncontested supremacy of spirit over matter and a complete imperturbability, had a long history before Christianity and outside of Christianity; that it was common to various philosophical schools (Neopythagorean, Stoic, Neoplatonist) and to certain religious movements (the *κατοχοί* of the Serapeum in Memphis, the Essenes and Therapeutae) which have nothing in common with Christianity. It has also been shown that the ideas and language of asceticism made their way rather slowly into the thought and life of Christian society, which at the outset moved upon a moral plane entirely different from that upon which men strove by a progressive spiritual training to effect the annihilation of the energies which give its dramatic character and charm to life. It is possible also to prove that Christianity became saturated with ascetic prepossessions in the precise measure in which the mystical fervor and charismatic enthusiasm that inspired it in the heroic period of its origins gradually declined.

In thus affirming that between asceticism and primitive Christianity there was no decisive affinity, ideal or practical, that the two movements proceeded from contradictory theoretical presuppositions and tended to entirely different ends, it is not meant to deny that the message of Christian salvation implies a renunciation of lower modes of life and a reversal of ideas of value far more profound and effective than those actuated by ascetic ideals. Moreover, while the Christian renunciation springs from a sudden inner metamorphosis, a radical *μετάνοια*, through which the individual, transfigured by the experience of his calling and of his spiritual transformation, immersed in the spirit, becomes incapable of any more fulfilling or consenting to the desires and inclinations of the flesh, the painful ascetic training, not sustained by warm mystical fervor nor guided by an eager messianic-eschatological expectation, makes the impression rather of being the doubtful result of a strenuous rational effort and of an aristocratic refinement of temper which never succeeded in communicating itself to the masses or of becoming a factor in great social

changes. The Christian renunciation is larger and more complete than the ascetic renunciation; but while the former has its origin in an intense charismatic commotion and its consummation in the joy of a psychical transfiguration, the latter has its roots in a profoundly pessimistic estimation of life and its destiny, and by its endeavor after ἀπάθεια condemns itself to barrenness.

The historical process lasting several centuries through which, for the original values of πίστις, μετάνοια and χαρά, Christian apologetic eventually substituted those of γνώσις, ἄσκησις and ἐγκράτεια was only the ethical reflection of a much larger process through which the Christian movement, originally a movement of a small minority dreaming of a cosmic palingenesis, was transformed into an official religion professed by the whole population, in which the heroic ideals came to be specially reserved for individuals who aspired to attain for themselves that τελείωσις which at the outset was the peremptory obligation of all the ἅγιοι.

Outside of the New Testament literature and that of the post-apostolic age, the author from whose writings we can gather most clearly at once the affinities and the differences between the ascetic attitude and the specifically Christian aspirations and experiences is Methodius of Olympus, the Anatolian martyr of the Maximinian persecution, who on the eve of Constantine's reform seems to reproduce in his mystical writings the most vivid and enthusiastic traits of the primitive eschatological expectation. Bonwetsch's recent excellent edition<sup>2</sup> of all the extant works of this exceptional author of the beginning of the fourth century enables us to study in its entirety, we may say, his ethical thought, and the profound and original way in which he integrated it with his hopes and with his historical and social ideas.

<sup>2</sup> Bonwetsch, Methodius. Leipzig, 1917. Bonwetsch devoted many years while teaching at the University of Dorpat to the works of Methodius. In 1891 he published a German translation of the Paleoslavlic Corpus Methodianum, and subsequently published a study on Methodius's theology (*Die Theologie des Methodius*. Berlin, 1903) in which the problem examined in the present article received somewhat scant attention. See also Bonwetsch's article on Methodius in the *Real-Encyclopädie für protestantische Theologie und Kirche*. Third edition, s. v.

At first sight the fate of Methodius in the literary history of the fourth century is surprising. Though an elegant and skillful writer, with a rich and deep religious experience, wearing the halo of martyrdom, he nevertheless did not receive from his contemporaries and immediate successors the recognition and appreciation which his literary productiveness and his heroic place in the history of the Church would have abundantly deserved. Adamantius reproduces large extracts from Methodius *περὶ τοῦ αὐτεξουσίου* and from his *περὶ ἀναστάσεως*, but takes good care not to name their author. Eusebius also quotes a considerable passage from the former of these two writings, but attributes it to Maximus (*De Praeparatione Evangelica* vii. 22); in Eusebius's historical works the name of Methodius never occurs. Only from Jerome do we learn that in the sixth book of his *Apology for Origen*, Eusebius leveled at Methodius the same reproach which Rufinus addressed to Jerome himself: "*Quomodo ausus est Methodius nunc contra Origenem scribere, qui haec et haec de Origenis locutus est dogmatibus*" (*Contra Rufinum* i. 11). And it is only in Jerome's *De Viris Illustribus* (83), in a paragraph which is evidently not taken like the rest from Eusebius, that we find the single notice — distorted and anachronistic, at that — which we possess about the bishop of Olympus: "*Methodius, Olympi Lyciae et postea Tyri episcopus, nitidi compositique sermonis adversus Porphyrium confecit libros et Symposium decem Virginum, de Resurrectione opus egregium contra Origenem, et adversus eundem de Pythonissa, et de αὐτεξουσία, in Genesim quoque et in Cantica Canticorum commentarios, et multa alia quae vulgo lectitantur. Et ad extremum novissimae persecutionis, sive ut alii affirmant sub Decio et Valeriano, in Chalcide Graeciae martyrio coronatus est.*"

When we recall, however, the sharply anti-Origenistic attitude of the martyr bishop, and on the other hand the deeply rooted Origenistic sympathies which characterized the productions of the most eminent representatives of ecclesiastical culture in Syria and Anatolia in the Constantinian epoch, and above all of Eusebius of Caesarea, we can easily understand how the posthumous fame of Methodius was eclipsed, and as

easily recognize the reasons why he enjoyed especial favor with Epiphanius, who praises him highly and quotes him copiously in his *Panarion*. This gives all the more reason to inquire how it came that the great ideals of renunciation which Origen had extolled and practised and Methodius had taken up to exalt with characteristic fervor appealed in the case of the two men to anthropological presuppositions and eschatological visions so diverse and contradictory.

Among the various forms and manifold elements of renunciation, virginal continence is intuitive, and naturally holds the first place. The principal dialogue of Methodius, the *Symposium*, or *περὶ ἀγνείας*, conceived and written after Platonic patterns, is a formal panegyric of virginity. Methodius imagines how Gregorium, 'the vigilant,' repeats to him the eulogies which were pronounced by ten virgins in the garden of Arete, extolling the virtue of immaculate chastity. The palm in this pious competition is bestowed on Thecla, who at the close of the *Symposium* sings a hymn to Christ the bridegroom, in which the author evidently intended to summarize in a series of stanzas<sup>3</sup> the way in which he himself regarded virginity in the cluster of Christian virtues and in the general scheme of Christian development in the life of this world. The hymn has a recurring refrain:

I consecrate myself to thee, O Bridegroom, and holding lamps<sup>4</sup> that give light I go to meet thee.

There are stanzas in this hymn from which it is manifest that Methodius was fully aware that his teaching concerning Christian perfection represented something new and unfamiliar in the Christian practice of his time, and something which is authorized only by a revived fervor of messianic expectation.

From above, O Virgins, comes the sound of a cry, the sound that raises the dead, saying, 'Go forth, all of you, to meet the bridegrooms in white robes and with your lamps, to the rising of the sun. Arise before the King comes to enter within the gates.'

<sup>3</sup> The rhythm of this poem has been analyzed by W. Meyer, *Gesammelte Abhandlungen zur mittellatein. Rhythmik*. ii (1905).

<sup>4</sup> The reference is, of course, to the parable of the wise and foolish virgins whose lamps did or did not give light. — Ed.

I flee from the happiness of mortals with all its sorrow, from the voluptuousness of life and from the sweets of love,<sup>5</sup> and I long to be held in thy life-giving arms and forever to see thy beauty, O Blessed One.

For thee, O King, have I left the mortal couch of marriage and my golden home and have come in spotless garments that I too may come with thee to enter into thy blessed chambers.

I have escaped the myriad enchanting wiles of the serpent and I have endured the flame of fire and the manslaying onslaughts of wild beasts, and I wait for thee from heaven.

I have forgotten my country, O Logos, and I long for thy grace: I have forgotten also the company of the Virgins that are my fellows,<sup>6</sup> the pride of my mother and my race, for thou, O Christ, art all things to me.

Giver of life art thou, O Christ, hail to thy light that knows no evening time. Do thou receive this cry: the company of Virgins entreats thee, O Flower of Perfection, Love, Joy, Prudence, Wisdom, Logos.

The hymn to Christ runs on for several stanzas more and then turns to the bride, the Church. Methodius is conscious that he is employing language strange to the community of the faithful and expressing forgotten conceptions and ideals. His song takes on a more fervid and elevated tone.

In hymns, O Blessed bride of God, we, thy attendants of the bride-chamber, honor thee now, O undefiled Virgin, Church with snow-white body, with dark hair, chaste, spotless, lovely.

Corruption has fled away and the tearful labors of disease. Death has been taken away and all folly has perished. Grief that wastes men's minds has perished and the joy of God has suddenly shone on mortals.

Paradise is no longer bereft of mortals, for again, as formerly, by divine decree there inhabits it he who fell by the manifold wiles of the serpent, incorruptible, without fear, blessed.

Singing the new song<sup>7</sup> the company of Virgins brings thee to heaven, O Queen; thou art full of light, and they are crowned with the white flowers of lilies and bear in their hands the flames that give light.

O Blessed One, who inhabitest the undefiled seats of heaven, thou who art without beginning, who governest all things by eternal power, receive within the gates of life us, too, O Father, with thy Son, for we are come.<sup>8</sup>

On the surface the eulogy lavished by Methodius upon virginity, of which this hymn is only the loftiest expression, may seem not to differ greatly from the ascetic theories which about a century before had been so clearly formulated by the two great Alexandrian Christian writers, Clement and Origen.

<sup>5</sup> Accepting Meyer's emendation. — Ed.

<sup>6</sup> The imagery here changes to that of Psalm 45, 11 ff. — Ed.

<sup>7</sup> The reference is to Rev. 5, 9 and Psalm 45. — Ed.

<sup>8</sup> Symposium xi. ed Bonwetsch, pp. 131-133, 136.

But when the mystical doctrines set forth by Methodius in the *περὶ ἀγνείας* are brought into connection with the anthropological and eschatological views defended in the *περὶ ἀναστάσεως*,<sup>9</sup> we immediately perceive the radical difference in the points of view from which spring on one side the asceticism of Origen and on the other the mystical enthusiasm of the Anatolian bishop.<sup>10</sup> The *περὶ ἀναστάσεως* is a polemical treatise directed against the Origenists. Methodius imagines that at Patara, in the house of a physician, Aglaophones, the question is discussed whether the flesh really participates in the joys of the resurrection and of immortality. Two of the interlocutors, the host Aglaophones and Proclus, agree with Origen in denying to the human body, such as has lived here on earth, any capacity to share with the spirit the blessed life. Methodius on the contrary, contends that the same human body which has passed from the world to the triumph of incorruptibility will joyfully participate in that life. With an eschatological outlook which reminds us of that of the first Christian generations, Methodius maintains that the sensible universe is not so radically corrupted as not to be able to enter as an integral element into the palingenesis through which the glory of the

<sup>9</sup> Of the *περὶ ἀναστάσεως* we have only the excerpts of the original Greek text in Epiphanius and Adamantius, but we possess the whole dialogue in a Paleoslavlic version, a German translation of which was published by Bonwetsch in his edition of Methodius's Works, pp. 217-424.

<sup>10</sup> In the Symposium, Methodius' eschatological doctrine is less prominent because the argument itself, that is to say the over-valuation of virginity, did not permit emphasis on an optimistic view of the bodily nature of man. This may explain why, besides its literary excellence, the Symposium was the only work of Methodius which became very popular and exerted a wide influence on Christian literature. It has been remarked (G. La Piana, *Le Rappresentazioni sacre nella letteratura Bizantina*. Rome, 1912, pp. 167 f.) that the whole Christian literary tradition (poetical, homiletical and theological) dealing with the theories and the practice of Christian virginity in general, and with the Virgin Mary as the typical example of this exalted state, has borrowed from Methodius not only a great deal of its content and of its biblical exegesis on this virtue, but even of its terminology. In a large number of sermons to which La Piana gave the title of Dramatic Homilies, under which they are now classified in the history of Christian literature, the influence of Methodius's Symposium is evident almost in every line; cf. the Hymn to Virginity reconstructed by La Piana from the *Ἐγκώμιον εἰς τὴν Θεοτόκον* attributed to Proclus of Constantinople, which is merely a poetical summary of the ten speeches of the virgins in Methodius's Symposium. (*Op. cit.*, pp. 236-241 and 166-169.)

triumphant Christ is revealed, and that in it man with his corporeal nature is not the expression of evil and perversion, but represents a work of the divine artist which only needs to be slightly retouched to be fit to enjoy without limit the blessing and the joy of the Father.

For when he saw man, his fairest work, corrupted by malignant plots of envy, he could not endure to leave him thus, such was his love of man, that man might not endure blame forever or his fault remain immortal, but he dissolved him into matter once more that all the faults which were in him might perish and disappear when he was formed afresh.<sup>11</sup>

In the eyes of Methodius, therefore, death is not as it was in Origen's conception the destruction of this foul bodily prison in which the soul is confined in expiation of an original sinful will to be embodied; it is rather the open passageway towards a providential restitution of the organism, which is called to a loftier destiny. In opposition to the pessimistic abhorrence of matter in which the asceticism of the Alexandrians delighted, Methodius vindicates the fundamental goodness of corporeal nature. Replying directly to an argument of Origen, he reasons that if, as Origen maintains, everything that is generated is diseased because it has needs and appetites, while only that is sound which experiences neither, and consequently man, who is generated, cannot be free from affections and immortal, it follows that angels and souls, which also are originated, are in the same case and will therefore perish. But neither angels nor souls perish, for they are immortal and indestructible as their Creator meant them to be. Therefore man also is immortal.<sup>12</sup>

By this acute *argumentum ad hominem* Methodius aims to demonstrate how fallacious and wholly contradictory Origen's attitude is in his estimate of the part assigned to matter in the plan of salvation.

He does not stop, however, with the negative side of his demonstration but, starting from one of the most typical features of Pauline eschatology, he rises to a grandiose vision of the intimate participation of all sensible nature in the joy of the messianic restitution.

<sup>11</sup> De Resurrectione i, 43, 3; Bonwetsch, p. 291.

<sup>12</sup> Ibid., i, 47, 1-2.

Nor is the statement satisfactory that everything will be utterly destroyed, and that earth, air, and heaven will no longer exist. The whole world will, indeed, be deluged with descending fire and be burnt out for purification and renewal, but it will not come to complete destruction and ruin. For if it were better for the world not to be rather than to be, why did God make the inferior choice in creating the world? No! God made nothing vainly or badly. Therefore God ordered the creation to exist and to remain, as Wisdom also confirms saying, 'For God created all things to have their being and the generations of the world were healthful and there is no poison of destruction in them.' Paul also clearly testifies to this saying, 'For the earnest expectation of creation waiteth for the revelation of the sons of God. For the creation was subject to vanity not willingly but by reason of him who subjected it in hope, that the creation itself may be set free from the bondage of corruption to the freedom of the glory of the children of God.' For, he says, the creation was subjected to vanity but is waiting to be set free from such bondage, and thus indicates that by the creation he means this world. For it is not the things which are not seen that are in bondage to corruption but these visible things. So then the creation will remain<sup>13</sup> at the resurrection, renewed to a better and more beautiful state, glad and rejoicing over the children for whom it now groans and travails and is itself waiting for our redemption from the corruption of the body, that when we have been raised up and have shaken off the mortality of the flesh according to that which is written, 'Shake off the dust and rise and sit, O Jerusalem,' and when we have been set free from sin, the creation itself shall be set free from corruption, no longer in bondage to vanity but to righteousness.<sup>14</sup>

The Christian chiliasts of the second century, of whom Papias and Irenaeus are the most explicit and authoritative representatives, had concentrated their mystical religious expectations in a scheme of cosmic palingenesis which should bring to the elect a blessedness embracing their whole being, gladdened by the rejuvenation and the exuberant fruitfulness of material nature. This serene vision had given them courage to sustain the struggle with the pagan world. Now, at the dawn of the fourth century, after the ingenuous idealism of primitive Christianity had been followed by the deadening constructions of the Gnostics and of Alexandrian speculation, Methodius revived the joyous idea of the millenium, and by reflex effect his own Christian experience became more profound, more heroic, more conscious that it could not be reduced to the values and perspectives of the world. In all his argumentation Methodius pursues the spiritualizing eschatology of

<sup>13</sup> It seems more probable that the text should be *μενεί* rather than *μένει*. — Ed.

<sup>14</sup> *Ibid.*, i, 47, 3-6; Bonwetsch, pp. 297-299.

Origen for the purpose of confuting and dispelling it. 'How then, our opponents say, if the universe is not destroyed, did Christ say that heaven and earth shall pass away, and the prophet that the heaven shall be dissolved like smoke and the earth grow old like a garment?' Methodius' acute reply is: 'It is the manner of scripture to use the word destruction (ἀπώλεια) for the transformation (μεταβολή) of the present constitution of the world into something better and more glorious, the previous form perishing in the change of all things into a more splendid state.'<sup>15</sup> Thus, according to Methodius, when we read in the scriptures of a ruin of the material universe we are to think of a providential palingenesis, wherein the animate and inanimate creation shall be raised in a state of existence which, while not abolishing the fundamental characteristics of the present world, exalts and ameliorates them in the highest degree. Methodius triumphantly concludes his argument against Origen by declaring confidently that, inasmuch as all things were essentially good when they proceeded from the creative hand of God, man also, such as he is, made up of soul and body, constitutes a nature in itself good, which shall participate in the joy of the immortal life with all the elements of its composite being, excluding none.<sup>16</sup>

These eloquent extracts from the two principal writings of Methodius may suffice to show the importance of the author in the development of ethical and metaphysical ideas at the dawn of the fourth century. They also give additional evidence of the profound interaction between ethics and eschatology. Morality is the more elevated and the more heroic, the more closely it is linked to an intense expectation of an impending providential revolution which shall give a new direction to the course of events and make a final end of the injustices and defects which exist, by its very constitution, in every social organization. In the midst of the portentous effort which Christian society was making in the fourth century to reduce the gospel proclamation to the formulas of a shallow and conservative religion, capable of adapting itself to circumstances and making

<sup>15</sup> Ibid., i, 48, 1-2.

<sup>16</sup> Ibid., i, 50.

compromises with them, the position of Methodius seems like the last anachronistic survival of that call to heroism which had been common in primitive Christianity and had been nurtured and supported by the great chiliastic dream. And whereas at the close of the fourth century, with Epiphanius and Jerome, ascetic practice and the doctrine of the resurrection of the flesh appear as the definitive reconciliation of an extra-Christian ascesis with a form of eschatology which is a substitute for primitive chiliasm, in the age of Diocletian and of Maximin the bishop of Olympus, candidate for martyrdom, delivers to Christian society the last challenge to the perfect renunciation under the simple stimulus of an enthusiastic faith in the restoration of the universe in the joy and freedom of the sons of God.

In place of this, only a few years later than Methodius, shortly after the victory of Licinius over Maximin, Eusebius of Caesarea established among Christians a dichotomy, which, while destined to have a clamant success in the subsequent evolution of Christian society, unquestionably represented the radical rejection of that programme of perfection which, according to the majority of Christian authors before Constantine, should have been the irremovable goal of every believer, who by definition and vocation was *τέλειος*. In the *Demonstratio Evangelica* Eusebius wrote:

. . . 'So that even for the Church of Christ rules have been laid down for two ways of life. The one is above nature and beyond ordinary human life; it admits neither marriage nor the begetting of children nor the acquirement or retention of property; it changes the ordinary and accustomed behavior of all men from beginning to end and makes them live for the service of God alone in the strength of heavenly love. Those who change over to this way seem to be dead to the life of mortals, and do but carry their body on earth for their soul has been translated in spirit to heaven. Like dwellers in heaven they look at the life of men, consecrated for the whole race to the God who is over all . . . not by animal sacrifices and blood nor by libations and sweet savor of offerings . . . but by sound doctrines of true piety and the disposition of a purified soul, and further by virtuous deeds and words. In this way, propitiating the divinity, they perform a priestly office in their own behalf and in behalf of others.' Such is the perfect way of Christian life. There is, however, Eusebius continues, another way, more within ordinary human capacity, which does not demand the abandonment of the rights and duties that belong to the political and social life of mankind. To contract marriage, have children, attend to business, faithfully obey the laws of the state, and in all spheres fulfil the tasks of a normal citizen — these are all things per-

fectly compatible with the Christian profession, provided with them be joined the strenuous purpose to maintain piety and devotion to the Lord. Christianity accepts as wholly praiseworthy this second rule of life also, in order that no class of men and no group of peoples may imagine themselves deprived of the eminent benefits of the 'saving manifestation' of Christ.<sup>17</sup>

Thus Eusebius, the future counsellor of Constantine, formulated that distinction between precepts and counsels in which the ethics of collective Christianity were ever thereafter to find their basis. Origen, also, had distinguished among Christians *πρακτικοί* from *θεωρητικοί*, but to the former had assigned as the proper place for them only the forecourt of the temple, while to the temple itself he granted access only to the pure. Eusebius, now, having regard to the pressing exigencies of a Christianity which by the very fact that it now aspired to be the religion of the majority was constrained to mitigate its primitive moral programme, combines in the same Christian profession the two categories of believers. It is easy to understand how in his eyes the exalted mysticism of Methodius and his attempt to reanimate the enthusiasm of the Christian renunciation by reviving the fervor of chiliastic expectation must have seemed like the vain self-deception of a man hopelessly behind the times. The historian who had described the ancient Papias of Hieropolis as a man 'scant of brains' could not have looked with complacency upon his successor in the fourth century. Methodius had to wait long decades before he found in Epiphanius an adequate appreciation of his doctrine of the resurrection of the flesh, although even in the Panarion the bishop of Salamis takes pains to purge his anti-Origenistic thought of the suspicion of chiliasm.

Christian society after Constantine found it most convenient to adopt the sharp distinction Eusebius made between the two different ways in which it is possible to live according to the gospel. But in the course of the centuries every revival of the religious spirit finds itself carried back to the mystical conception of the earliest Christian generations for which the message of Christ could be taken in only one possible way, in that, namely, which demands renunciation of the world in the expectation of perfect righteousness.

<sup>17</sup> *Demonstratio Evangelica*, i, 8.